

## 7.8.08: Coalition Plans Major Health Care Reform Drive

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By Sandy Kleffman

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SAN FRANCISCO — In cities across the nation, a coalition of groups kicked off a \$40 million campaign Tuesday with a simple message for the presidential candidates: Affordable health care should be available to all Americans by 2009.

The groups plan to spend \$1.5 million on advertising immediately and will invest \$25 million in a media blitz before the November election. They also plan to have 100 organizers in 45 states.

"There's never been a campaign of this size or breadth for the cause of health care," said Anthony Wright, executive director of Health Access California, a consumer advocacy group. He is also a veteran of numerous health care battles. "California can and should be a leader in this debate."

San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom announced the movement with other leaders on the steps of San Francisco City Hall as Lt. Gov. John Garamendi held a similar event in Los Angeles.

In Washington, D.C., Elizabeth Edwards, the wife of former presidential candidate John Edwards, announced her participation. All told, kickoff events were held in 52 cities.

The coalition, dubbed Health Care for America Now, unites labor unions, consumer groups, doctors and liberal activists.

Participants include the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, or ACORN, Service Employees International Union, Planned Parenthood, MoveOn, the Small Business Majority, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Health Access California and many other groups.

"We all know about this crisis — it's time to bring all Americans together to address it," said Paul Kumar, administrative vice president of SEIU-United Health Care Workers West. "It's simply not sustainable to continue doing what we're doing."

Instead of promoting a detailed plan, the coalition released a statement of general principles for reform. It proposes a system in which no one is left out, people have a choice of a private or public health plan, benefits cover all necessary preventive services and treatments for chronic diseases and there is equity in access to health care.

The group also wants effective cost controls and a watchdog to prevent insurers from inappropriately delaying or denying care.

It did not call for a single-payer system that would eliminate private insurance companies, a proposal that has prompted vigorous opposition. At the San Francisco event, however, speakers had harsh words for the role that insurers and health maintenance organizations play in the health care system.

"They may call it managed care — I call it managed greed," said Dr. Stuart Bussey of the Union of American Physicians and Dentists. He told of a diabetic patient whose leg was amputated recently because of an inability to get health care.

Several speakers complained of people being inappropriately denied care or charged excessive fees while getting little in return.

"We're addressing the members of Congress and the presidential candidates to say which side are you on?" said Art Pulaski, executive secretary-treasurer of the California Labor Federation. "Are you on the side of George W. Bush, who thinks the free market is going to solve this problem?"

A spokeswoman for insurance companies released a statement Tuesday with a different view of the health care problem. Treatments are driving up costs because of wide variance in care, overuse, underuse and misuse of services and proliferation of expensive technologies without evidence to compare their effectiveness, said Karen Ignagni, president and CEO of America's Health Insurance Plans.

"We advocate providing coverage for all Americans by repairing the safety net and providing a helping hand to working families and small business owners who are struggling to afford coverage," she said.

The national movement is kicking off just a few months after the failure of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's health care reform plan. But Newsom said he remains optimistic that this is the time for reform in Washington with a new president and Congress on the horizon.

National leaders should follow San Francisco's example, said Newsom and others.

A year ago, the city became the first in the nation to attempt to provide universal health care for its residents. Employers sued to block a mandatory contribution to the plan, and many residents have yet to enroll. But speakers praised the city for its attempt, which has expanded access to health care for thousands of low-income residents.

"It shouldn't happen just in a small city like ours," Newsom said. "The money is there. We find money to treat sick people in our emergency rooms. Don't tell me we can't find the money to invest in people's health."